

What is a gender stereotype?

Gender stereotypes are simplified, generalised assumptions about people's gender attributes, differences, and roles.

Many people recognize the dangers of gender stereotyping, yet they continue to perpetuate them. Stereotypes are often passed from generation to generation, for example within families, by religious leaders, by the media and by celebrities. Children can be particularly susceptible to the influence of gender stereotyping.

- A traditional **female stereotype** involves: getting married, having children, being a homemaker, being loving and nurturing, being beautiful and desirable.
- A traditional **male stereotype** involves: being strong and unemotional, being a financial provider, being competitive, career focused, dominant and assertive.

Activity

You are going to undertake a survey of children's storybooks, to analyse how far gender stereotypes are being perpetuated. Start by considering the following contextual factors surrounding children's storybooks and taking some notes:

1. What are the **purpose(s)** of children's story books?
2. Children are the primary **target audience**, but what **other audiences** would the writer need to consider?
3. What are some typical **contexts for reading** children's storybooks? Consider when, where and how they might be read.
4. Are there any **other issues** that the writer would need to consider?

Your survey of children's storybooks:

- Randomly select at least eight children's storybooks from the library.
- Scan each text and record your findings in the table on the next pages.

Title/ Author	Date of publication	Approximate age of child reader	Gender of chief character (s)	What are the characters made to do?	Evidence of gender stereotyping?	Further comments
1.						
2.						
3.						
4.						

Title/ Author	Date of publication	Approximate age of child reader	Gender of chief character (s)	What are the characters made to do?	Evidence of gender stereotyping?	Further comments
5.						
6.						
7.						
8.						

Analysing your findings

- Overall, how much evidence of gender stereotyping did you find in your sample?
- Were there any anomalies in your sample?
- Which book seems to show most evidence of gender stereotyping, and which the least?
- What possible reasons are there for your findings?
- How might these books affect the children who read them?

Applying the research of Baker and Freebody (1989)

Carolyn Baker and Peter Freebody analysed the frequency of words used to refer to males and females in 163 books aimed at primary school children.

They found that boy characters outnumbered girl characters by a ratio of 3:2.

They found that girl characters were more frequently described with adjectives like 'little' and 'pretty', whereas boy characters were described as 'brave' and 'naughty'.

Boy characters were associated with verbs such as 'shout' and 'work' whereas girl characters would typically 'talk', 'play', 'like' and 'dance'.

Mothers were located in domestic or emotion rich activities, such as 'bake', 'hug', 'kiss', and 'thank'.

Fathers were associated with verbs such as 'paint', 'fix', and 'drive'.

- How far are the findings of Baker and Freebody supported by your research? Suggest possible reasons for similarities/differences.
- What is your own view of the ways male and female characters were portrayed in Baker and Freebody's sample?
- How could these uses of language influence child readers and secondary audiences of children's storybooks?